Breath and Blood and Burning

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/11431287.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Kitsune, Nogitsune, #FuelForRadiance, Don't copy to another site
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Hannibal Anthologies
Collections:	Fuel for Radiance
Stats:	Published: 2017-07-07 Completed: 2017-07-21 Words: 8,738 Chapters: 3/3

Breath and Blood and Burning

by TheSilverQueen

Summary

It's true that originally Hannibal had had no intention of interacting with Will Graham besides toying with him for the small pleasure it would bring him before Hannibal moves on to the next skin, the next name, the next tail.

And then Will stomps away shouting about field kabuki, and, really, that was too great an opportunity for Hannibal to pass up.

So Hannibal does the reasonable thing and starts the arduous process of turning Will into a fellow kitsune.

Notes

This is my contribution towards #FuelForRadiance in celebration of the Radiance Anthology.

See the end of the work for more notes

The Burning

Chapter Summary

The first stage is the burning.

Chapter Notes

Look at that, two new fics in the same week, #I'mAWriter. :D

Title is shamelessly derived from the prompt of the Radiance Anthology, and you can view this as the . . . work I could have submitted, if I'd had my wits together and not had two Big Bangs to work on.

Also warning: I am NOT at all, in any way, shape, or form, an expert on kitsune. Legit all I know comes from some old Japanese mythology I used to read and season 3 of Teen Wolf. Besides the name and the tail-thing, almost everything else I have completely and utterly made up for funsies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It would be a lie to say that Hannibal knew from the very first moment he ever sat in Will's presence that Will would become his. Will is fascinating and lovely and smells absolutely terrible, but Hannibal has lived far too long to be swayed by scent and sight and the song of a human's voice, no matter how alluring that voice is. Hunters can be the most beautiful of all humans, he's learned, and their sharp wit can cut sharper and deadlier than any other weapon in this world.

Actually, for quite a time he considers merely taking Will as a servant of sorts, a toy to amuse himself with to pass this lifetime before he moves on to his next skin, his next name, his next tail.

And then he's sitting in a field, watching as FBI agents wander around like dazed flies, minding his own business and licking his paws and grooming his tails when Will Graham stomps away, face lit up with recognition and fury, and the infuriating man shouts, "This man has no interest in, in field kabuki!"

Hannibal nearly bites his nail off.

Certainly, he'd heard tales in his youth. Even if his mother hadn't warned him long, long ago, when Hannibal's attachment to the human girl Mischa had nearly cost him his one and only

tail, the Lady Murasaki had seen through his disguise too. She'd laid eyes on him and immediately he had known that no amount of illusions could conceal the seven tails that cast shadows on the floor as long as Hannibal's own form. She could see, and she knew, and she was rightfully wary, even if her knowledge made her intoxicating beyond belief to him. What could be more alluring to a trickster than to know someone who could not be fooled except by choice?

Now Hannibal is, of course, older and wiser and more powerful, with eight tails and white-gold fur and so he does the smart thing: he gets Will Graham into his office, sprouts off some platitudes, and takes a good, long whiff of the man beneath the horrible human smell.

Will Graham smells like *possibility*.

Hannibal lets his fangs slide out, lets his shadows bleed through the floor, lets the room go dark with his power, and Will is just turning around, a horrified slow realization on his face, when Hannibal pounces and slams the man to the ground, sinking needle sharp fangs into his neck and commanding him to sleep.

Will might have an inkling of Hannibal's true nature, but knowledge is not always enough power even if it is power. Will sleeps.

Hannibal wraps his eight tails around Will's head and concentrates, even as he croons to the man cradled in his shadows, a sight that any other of Hannibal's kin would shame him for. Will won't be just a man much longer, anyways. He'll be Hannibal's equal, and his transformation will give Hannibal enough power for his last and final tail, and then nothing will ever be beyond Hannibal again. He won't lose this gorgeous, delicious potential the same way he lost Mischa and Murasaki and Chiyoh and countless others.

The first stage is the burning. This is the part Hannibal remembers the most vividly from his own birth, because even when he was young and near death in the freezing cold, he still shuddered at the thought of starting a fire. It's the most painful part of the process, simply because it is the part that causes the most change. It was even more painful to Hannibal because he kept clawing back to awakening to fight and scream and fight some more, because he'd prided himself on his mind most of all, and it's the mind that undergoes the most of the changes with the burning.

Will is no different.

Oh, Will can fight, surely. He's not weak, and he was a former police officer. And he's not unattractive either. But Will knows the same thing Hannibal did – his mind is his greatest asset and his last sanctuary, and he fights tooth and nail to keep his grasp on his human reality even as the burning takes hold to open his eyes to Hannibal's world.

The ravenstag is new, though. When Hannibal had undergone the burning, he'd seen different sights the same way everyone does – shadows that were not just shadows, faces that held wilder and stranger real ones underneath, hearts that were blackened by deceit and souls that were dimmed by disease. He had emerged from his transformation seeing the pigs of the world for what they were truly were, and that first glimpse of true sight has never quite left

Hannibal's eyes, even now. But the point is that he had seen *real* things: dragons, demons, kelpies. There is no such thing as a ravenstag.

Will had said it was his imagination and his empathy that the FBI wanted.

Perhaps, Hannibal muses, watching as Will fights against the flames of the burning, he should have taken Will at his word.

It takes imagination to make a trickster, after all, but what happens when the caterpillar already has the imagination to fly and fights to claw off the wings that grow steadily from his back? What then?

Tobias Budge is a fool. Hannibal knows exactly what he wants from Hannibal – he wants a tail, freely given or taken in blood, because those are the only ways a tail can be gained, whether from others or earned by the kitsune in question. Of course, nogitsune like Hannibal have a little more flexibility with these rules, but that doesn't mean Hannibal wants to wander down the thorn-filled less-traveled path for the likes of Tobias Budge.

The man doesn't even have the manners to outright *ask*, for heavens' sake.

Not that Hannibal would have indulged him for politeness's sake alone, but even nogitsune are bound by the rules of polite conversation, and Hannibal could have certainly pointed in the direction of better opportunities. It's no fur from his back to set a human on one of his rivals. If Tobias had failed, he would go down swinging and Hannibal could expand his territory and reputation on the weakness and destruction Tobias left behind. If Tobias succeeded, he'd replace a far more experienced and powerful rival with his puny one-tailed self, and Hannibal has eight tails – he could eat a one-tail for a snack, if he truly was stirred to.

Then, of course, Tobias has the audacity to lie about killing Will, and that's when Hannibal decides that this ends now.

He's a little irritated that he has to do this the human way, because he'd much rather wrap Tobias in his tails and drag him back to Hannibal's old sanctuary to let him taste power in the worst way possible. He's heard stories of how the angels of old could obliterate mortals merely by obliging them and showing their true face, and he's always wanted to try it – but alas, Will has stepped into Hannibal's path yet again, and since Will started this movie, Hannibal must play along it or risk upsetting the entire board. So he grits his teeth against the pain and kills Tobias the old-fashioned way, and instead of taking Tobias's body and soul and heart, he only takes Tobias's soul.

Hannibal isn't *quite* that merciful, after all.

"You wanted to see my true form," Hannibal tells Tobias, horror-struck from where he's trapped in a single drop of water from a sacred well high in the mountains of Hannibal's first awakening. He grins a fox smile and lets his tail unravel from the shadow and watches the way Tobias opens his mouth to start screaming. "Feast your eyes, mortal, and know that you never could have been one of us."

Tobias screams for a long, long, long time, and it's music to Hannibal's ears. Then, when Tobias's soul is smaller like a speck of dust, Hannibal extracts him and sneaks into Will's house when the man is muttering in his sleep, sweating as the fever burns through his body to make the changes necessary to house a kitsune of Will's potential and withstand the sheer power of when Will finally awakens. He kisses his poor kit on the forehead and then ceremonially burns Tobias's soul, because he's not above unorthodox methods to ensure that the fever reaches completion.

There is always a chance, his mother had once told him, in between bouts of Hannibal struggling to escape the fires around him, *that the fever will not take, that the mortal will burn out before the end. It is the risk we all take to ensure the continuation of our kind. You must judge whether or not it is worth the burning.*

Will opens his eyes as Tobias's soul screams and writhes on the pyre, and his brow furrows as he takes in Hannibal's white-gold fur and sharp fangs and the eight tails that blanket the entire room, and he says, " . . . Hannibal?"

And that is when Hannibal knows that he will survive, and he smiles and soothes his little kit and says, "Sleep, little one. All will be well."

Chapter End Notes

Part two is "The Blood" and it contains, shockingly, blood XD

The Blood

Chapter Summary

The second stage is the blood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If the burning brings the greatest change in the mind, then it is the blood that brings the greatest change in the body. Of course, Will already endured some change – how else could his brilliant, beautiful mind withstand seeing the things his kitsune mind could now comprehend – but the most important part of being of a kitsune is the ability to change, to adapt, to *become*.

When Hannibal had emerged from the burning, weak and voice gone from screaming, it had been all too easy for his mother to open a vein with her claws and drip the lifeblood into his thirsty, thirsty throat.

Will, of course, is very different.

Will emerges from the fever *furious*, mind and eyes clear, and when Hannibal goes to visit him, Will takes one look at him and presses his mouth into a thin line, and Hannibal knows his darling, gorgeous kit will not be nearly so easy to lead through the second stage of the change. If only he had had more time . . .

But “if only” will not save Will now.

He plays Will’s game, he puts on a good show, he cooks and talks and murders, and if sometimes late at night he turns into shadow and sits on the ledge in the basement of the BSHCI, well.

No one ever said kitsune never got attached.

He does try, this time, for honesty. He started the fever in lies of omission, and perhaps honesty is what Will needs to understand, he thinks.

“What are you?” Will asks him, one foot out the door, gun already tucked away.

“Old,” Hannibal answers, because sometimes it is difficult to put into words. “Very old. My . . . creator, if you will, called us kitsune, the spirits of the mountains.”

“Kitsune,” Will repeats, and the word is lovely on his tongue, if halting and foreign. He does not turn around; perhaps even now, he might walk away and vanish into the night, never to be seen again. The changes brought on by the burning cannot be erased, not with time and not with distance, but without Hannibal to provoke the next stage, Will won’t be at risk for further transformation. He will remain as he is: half in his world, and half in Hannibal’s.

At least, for a time.

Hannibal would never let his kit leave entirely, after all.

Then Will turns around. His eyes are clear, and although he does not take the gun back out, Hannibal gets the sense that he is still quite angry. “Kitsune were renowned for being tricksters,” Will states.

Hannibal tilts his head. “Would you say I am not a trickster?”

“We both know what you are.”

“A doctor. A chef. A friend, if you will allow it.”

“You,” Will says, “you took a human soul and you built a pyre under my bed and you burned that soul to give me strength. You lit a fire in my mind and you watched as I descended into madness. *You framed me for your crimes and were going to let them slice me open and fry me alive.* You are no friend of mine.”

And, well, let it not be said that Hannibal does not answer to the charges laid upon his doorstep.

“They would never have laid a hand on you,” Hannibal says, very quietly, but he knows that in the darkness, his eyes are glowing and the shadows are starting to move.

Will snarls. “Then what do you call the strip search when I was admitted? The drugs they gave me?”

“Violations. Trespasses. Crimes. And for that, I will take my due when it is time.”

And Will, of course, Will surprises him yet again, for Will smiles at that, and it is Hannibal’s turn to start because he can see, very faintly, that Will’s eyes are glowing too, bright yellow in the darkness, and that is not something the fever can bring but . . . Will has been exceptional. Perhaps he was drawn to Will’s scent for more than one reason.

“No, you won’t,” Will murmurs. “Not if I get to them first.”

Bedelia is interesting. She is not quite what Hannibal is, not really, but he has seen her form and it is vaguely fox-shaped. From the first moment they met, she had raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow and he had inclined his head, and from then they have coexisted in . . . uneasy peace, at least.

Hannibal really isn't sure who is more powerful, but perhaps he is older and stronger, for when she flees, following her is as easy as breathing.

"You know," Bedelia says after a long sip of wine, "it is rather rude to lurk in the shadows outside someone's window."

Hannibal takes the reprimand as it is and slips through the shadows. At night, it's easy, and from one breath to another, he jumps from outside her window to the shadows at the corner of the room. He lets the shadows burn as he emerges, until he stands taller than her with fox ears on his head and fangs in his mouth and eight tails that wrap around the entire room. It's an impressive display, and more than a few other kitsune have shied away in his presence.

Bedelia takes another sip of wine.

"It is also rather rude," Hannibal replies, "to not announce plans to leave in person."

Bedelia sighs. "I'm too old to fight for territory anymore, Hannibal. You have made a kit, and I presume you will share your territory with him. I have no interest in being used for play-stalking by a one-tail."

"What makes you think he'll be a one-tail?"

"Your kind always are, in the beginning. Unless you plan to donate a tail to make him stronger?"

Her tone reflects her dry disbelief, so Hannibal of course has to say, "And who says I won't?"

To her credit, she only swallows once. It is a threat, after all; as an eight-tail, Hannibal could hunt her down easily, even if killing her might take some effort. But to have, say, two four-tails after her is another story entirely. "All the more reason for me to leave sooner rather than later," she says coolly. "Are you asking for a formal apology, Hannibal Lecter?"

Hannibal blinks, just once, and lets his fox eyes glow. She is old, he sees, and tired. Not without cunning, but not quite as interesting anymore.

He has better ways to spend his time.

"No," Hannibal decides, and he lets his fires die down so that only his tails remain, curving and flicking through the air. It's so rare that he's free to let them roam, so he takes full advantage of this opportunity. "Just be aware that I expect a formal acknowledgement if you ever decide to return."

Bedelia smiles thinly. "Not whilst Will Graham lives."

Smelling Freddie Lounds on his kit is a punch to Hannibal's very soul. He has opened his kit's eyes to an entire new world, broadened his palette and freed his mind, and instead he has been rewarded with this betrayal.

In a small, distant part of his mind, he admires his kit's cunning.

In the larger, more potent part, he is *furious*.

If it is the humans Will wishes to be among, Hannibal decides, then it is among the humans Will can count himself.

“Is something wrong?” Will asks quietly.

Hannibal smiles, and thinks of an old, sacred knife buried in the depths of an ancient sanctuary across the sea. It had been the blade that had halted the fever of Mischa’s transformation and left her gasping and dying in the snow, and it had *burned* when Hannibal had scooped it up but he had endured the pain out of rage, and when he had found the murderers who stole his kit’s life he had taken great pleasure in slicing them open with that exact same knife as they had howled and screamed and begged. He’s not quite sure what the knife is made of, except that it repels everything that Hannibal is. However, it no longer hurts him to touch; he suspects the pain he endured to wield it is what granted him his second tail.

But Will is not an eight-tail. Will isn’t even a one-tail. Will is just a little kit, wandering in the snow and deliberately choosing the path away from the eye of the storm.

So Hannibal will just give him a little . . . push, is all.

Will does not scream when Hannibal guts him. Will does not flinch or cry or beg. If anything, his grasp upon Hannibal becomes so tight it actually hurts, and Hannibal would smile at the kitsune strength in his little kit if he wasn’t so busy nearly crying.

“I gave you a gift,” Hannibal says, “but you did not want it. So here I am to collect it.”

And it took a soul to power Will’s first transformation, a soul, in fact, that Hannibal plucked from the lungs of a screaming little girl who looked just like Abigail, so it is only fitting that now he will burn Abigail’s soul to take it away. When the blade starts glowing, Will starts to understand, and it is only then that he starts to beg – but it is too late.

Abigail’s soul burns in the blade, and Will’s brilliant, beautiful kitsune mind begins to burn with it.

And then Hannibal leaves. He has no reason to concern himself with a mere human, after all.

Somehow, someway, Will’s mind does not abandon him. When Will comes to him, when he bears his own blade, when he sits in front of Hannibal and professes that he too is changed beyond recognition, it is the scent of a kitsune that he brings with him, and Hannibal does not understand. He burned a soul to end the transformation and let the power be lost to the elements, and yet – and yet Will sits crumpled before him, a kitsune in a human body still.

Hannibal does not *understand*.

He tastes Will’s blood, briefly, as he cuts apart the brain and the soul he intends to devour, and he is lost in bliss, for it is the blood of a kitsune he tastes, and he knows then that it is too

late. He cannot reverse the transformation now. Will might have fought the burning, but he fought even harder to retain what the burning gave him, and “creator” is not really an accurate label for what Hannibal is. He merely provided the spark. Will grew his own fangs and claws after that.

“So,” Hannibal says quietly, as they hang in the back of a truck, “we are kin now.”

Will flashes a fang at him. “Only if I don’t sever the bond first.”

When Chiyoh sees Hannibal start to open the veins in his arm, she stops him with a cool look and a raised eyebrow.

“You would give your lifeblood for one who refused you and sold you out.”

Chiyoh never underwent the burning. She has never known a kitsune, only legends. Yet she understands the power of blood freely given, and she understands even more the sting of a betrayal that cannot be forgiven, only repaid with blood.

But she does not understand the bond.

“I am his,” is all Hannibal can say. “How can I refuse him this?”

“I would think it is more important that he be yours first.”

Hannibal smoothes his kit’s curls back and kisses his forehead. He smells clean, now, at least, after a shower to wash away Cordell’s blood and fresh clothing that Hannibal, with great difficulty, resisted scenting, and right now he smells of lightning and ozone and power. It is a scent Hannibal has given him, far more overpowering and permanent than any cologne, and after something like that, what is a little blood?

“That is Will’s choice, not mine. I can only give him what I can, and the rest is up to him.”

“I suppose it is upon your tails that it rests,” Chiyoh says, and she’s trying to aim for nonchalant but it sounds more disapproving. He would frown at her, but the door swings and she’s already gone, to keep watch.

He’s not quite why she still protects him. Lady Murasaki, after all, chose death over allowing Hannibal’s burning to continue.

But that is a question for another day. For now, Hannibal merely tips Will’s jaws open and opens a neat incision in his arm and lets his lifeblood flow into Will’s mouth. However he’s been sustaining his kitsune powers, it won’t be enough; only the blood of a true kitsune who can withstand the sacrifice will be enough to get Will through to the third and final stage. And perhaps when Will wakes, he shall try to kill Hannibal again or just walk away, but it does not matter.

Hannibal tried to take away Will’s powers, and Will fought him to keep them. A little blood is a small price to pay to see his kit’s final transformation.

Maybe his kit will even let him live long enough to see Will’s first glorious tail grow from the shadows.

Chapter End Notes

Part 3 will be "The Breath" and it contains, shockingly, breathing XD

The Breath

Chapter Summary

> The third stage is the breath.

Chapter Notes

> Um . . . . . so now dragons exist in my kitsune verse. And like . . . . . kelpies and selkies and angels and unicorns. For the record, I didn't plan this, it just sorta happened.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Hannibal, it's always been incredibly ironic that the most powerful part of the change for a kitsune – the one that defines the very nature of who they are – requires something that kitsune can completely do without.

A kitsune does not need to breathe, after all. Kitsune are spirit and energy and soul, but it is the breath that is the third stage that allows them to transcend humanity.

Of course, this is also the stage that allows for the most flexibility. The burning must be a burning, whether physical or mental or spiritual, and the blood must be shared. But the breath is the soul of the kitsune, and each kitsune may choose to share different parts of that soul. Some share the winds of the ocean that never slow, some share the taste of trees older than humanity, and some share the fire at the heart of the planet.

Hannibal's mother chose to share the power of fear and desperation and how to sing to a soul and murmur to a mind, round and round and round, until it knew nothing but the dizzying thrill of near-death, and so she drowned him, endlessly, until he was mindless with fear and gasping for air. Then she affixed her mouth to his and *breathed*, and a tiny part of her soul shook loose and took root deep in the very nature of Hannibal's being, and when he opened his eyes and saw a proud gold fox sitting before him, changing the nature of his being to suit his mother came as easy as blinking. She groomed his ears and tugged at his one lonesome tail, and then she trotted away, her part done. Hannibal did not follow; he did not need to and he did not want to.

He imagines it will be different with Will.

He did not know just quite *how* different.

The first time Hannibal lays eyes on Will in three years, he closes his eyes and tilts his head and *inhales*, because Will smells like human (interesting) and dog (not so interesting) and ozone. So he smiles, and when Will's scent turns charged, he smiles even more.

"What we are cannot be so easily erased," Hannibal says quietly.

Will pointedly bears human teeth at him. "But we can be controlled, can we not?" he replies. "Fire and water, light and dark, earth and air."

"You have been doing some research."

Will looks away, and they both know it is false praise. Will does not need to do research any more than Hannibal did. The blood remembers, and what the blood does not, the instincts of the burning guide the rest. Hannibal did not hold back when he pressed their veins together and let his lifeblood flow, and now Will knows almost everything that Hannibal does about their kind. The only things he does not are things that are still beyond the comprehension of his human soul.

"I won't become like you," Will says.

"That is true. You cannot. The burning cannot evoke sparks where there is no kindling, my kit."

Amusingly, the nickname seems to annoy Will more than anything else – more than the stringent security searches in order to see Hannibal, more than the rather lavishly decorated plastic cell, more than even the scent of Hannibal lingering in his nose. Will bristles, and then he says, "Don't tell me you cannot make kindling. One of your age – "

"I am still bound by the rules. Without them, there would be no balance."

"Since when have you cared about balance?" Will laughs.

Hannibal cocks his head. "Balance is everything that I am. I removed one kitsune from the scales of the world, and now I am bound to repay that."

Will looks at him, and perhaps he doesn't mean to, but his eyes go kitsune-gold and the shadows darken around his waist. Hannibal breathes in the scent of ozone and remembers that same scent, bitter and biting, whipping at his nose as he tore into nogitsune's throat and shattered its tails amongst the wreckage. It is warning and welcoming all at once, and he can't help the way his legs stutter forward, first one and then the other. Will is his *kit*; he could never abandon him.

"Lady Murasaki," Will murmurs. "Was she – "

"No."

"You do not smell of regret."

"Should I?" Hannibal asks, genuinely curious. "Should I carry regret for ending a nogitsune determined to destroy me?" That Hannibal had provoked the creature remains unspoken; for

Will's understanding of Hannibal, that's practically Hannibal's calling card.

"Depends," Will replies mildly. "Do you regret wasting your chance at the ultimate creation on me?"

"How can I regret something that I've barely started?"

Will is perhaps so startled by this that he actually deigns to look Hannibal straight in the face, kitsune-gold to nogitsune-black. Will places one hand on the glass, and as Will's tail curls around him, gentle and questioning, Hannibal lets his tails slide out, darkening the room in favor of slipping through the glass to curl around the edges of his kit. Any closer, and the resulting sparks might actually light a fire, and Hannibal has no desire to feign smoke inhalation.

"If you could be free at any time – " Will realizes.

"No mortal cage can hold a shadow," Hannibal says, and then he pulls his tails back inside, swallows his fire and his blood and his breath and coils it all up until he is just the Chesapeake Ripper, a little mortal in a little mortal world. "Go, Will. You know the price of my cooperation to find your killer."

Will does not even seem surprised as time restarts around them. Instead, he narrows his eyes and says, "All I need is the right song for you."

"Perhaps."

"I learned from the best," Will retorts. "Definitely."

The song of freedom – because even the mortals know what transporting Hannibal means – is a tempting song indeed.

Hannibal still demands a please, though.

Words to a kitsune, after all, can be as great a price to pay as actions. Hannibal's always wondered what a kiss to free a trapped princess feels like. And a Will who flutters his eyelashes and lets his tail out to dance alongside the room, it turns out, is rather a suitable Prince Charming.

Face me, darkness, Francis hisses, and to Hannibal's kitsune eyes, he is a writhing mass of wings of blood and massive black holes for eyes.

Hannibal looks at him from behind his plastic mask and ripped clothing and broken cage, and says nothing. Dragons and kitsune are different and alike in many ways, but Hannibal's never seen the creation of a dragonling the way he's seen the creation of a kit. Mostly, he finds that he is . . . curious.

Francis takes one more step. *Face me, or let me swallow your kit.*

Hannibal sighs. So impatient. “Not here, dragonling,” he says. “You know better. Or at least, you should know better.”

Maybe I no longer care about better, Francis snarls, and from of the depths of his mass, he coughs up a single scale, gleaming and blood-red in the light. To mortal eyes, it would be a shiny trinket. To supernatural eyes, it is as good as a challenge.

“Kistune were ruling the mountains long before dragons made roosts of castles,” Hannibal warns, “and we rule those mountains still.”

Francis smiles, and Hannibal watches the mass burn away in the sun to reveal his human form again, the only difference to mark him the single red scale affixed in the hollow of his throat, where his creator melded scale with skin to begin the burning of a new dragon. The scale of the creator lends strength and durability to the growing skin of the dragonling, so that the creator may offer protection and knowledge as the dragonling grows.

Unfortunately for him, it seems his creator did not see fit to pass on that knowledge.

There is a reason that the dragons never came to the mountains that the kitsune called home, and it was not because some were too young or shy to fly across the land and sea.

“You should not have eaten your creator,” Hannibal says mildly.

And who are you to tell me that? Eating your enemies gives you strength, does it not? Francis smiles and spreads his wings, and it would be a mighty display if Hannibal weren’t busy paying more attention to the groaning kit in the background than the impudent dragonling in front of him. *Fear me, kitsune – I felled my own creator and ate his scales one by one.*

“Fear me, dragonling,” Hannibal replies politely. “I’ve eaten hundreds of dragons.”

“Why me?” Will asks quietly, eyes fixed ahead as the cliff house looms in the distance.

It is difficult to put his reasoning into words. Hannibal chose Will because he did – because his tails said so, and because his soul said so, and because his curiosity said so. Kitsune are forces of nature, and nature roams where it will and does as it wishes. Finally, Hannibal clears his throat and says, “Because you smelled of lightning, and the lightning among us are the most unpredictable.”

Will gives him the side-eye, but it’s less of a you-are-lying-to-me side eye and more of a you’re-being-sappy-again side eye. Hannibal will take it.

“And you are?”

“I am the shadow out of the corner of one’s eye, the whisper in the fell wind, the hunger that eats men from the inside out.”

“Basically . . . you are drama,” Will concludes.

“Fear is an art,” Hannibal says archly, parking the car and gesturing for Will to get out. “And practice hones all kinds of art.”

The bullet is pain, sharp and pointed like a needle, but for all of that, it is still one tiny needle against all that Hannibal is. This bullet will not kill him. No mortal weapon could; even fire, which has felled kitsune before, was a weapon of the gods of creation first before it belonged to humans.

Still, it is painful, and drenched in dragon blood that eats at Hannibal’s kitsune heart, so Hannibal lies on the ground and waits for Francis’s next move.

Francis crouches on the ground and smiles with dragon fangs. “I win,” he says.

“Hmm. You should know better than that,” Hannibal chides, because honestly, if a dragonling is going to attempt to kill an eight-tail they should at least know the basics of how. “Our kinds do not fight to first blood. We fight to the death. And a blow that does not kill us outright is unlikely to be our death in the long run.”

“I don’t need to kill you to end you, Hannibal,” Francis says, and then he turns pointedly to look at Will –

But it’s too late.

In a blink of an eye, Will blurs into shadow and light, leaping clear across the room to land on Francis’s back. The dragonling roars and flares his wings, but the lightning kitsune were always more at home in the air than on land; even as Francis shakes, Will clings on, snarling in his face. Will is only dislodged when Francis brings his claws to bear and stabs them into Will’s face, and Will recoils out of human instinct, even if any mature kitsune would keep on fighting with tail and teeth.

Will makes no sound, but sparks go off through the air as Francis heaves Will off, and the scent of ozone makes Hannibal stand almost automatically.

This is how the kitsune of old were once trapped and bled and warped – because in the end, they could not ignore the distress of their fellow kind, especially their kith and kin. More than one kitsune came to aid a kit only to find themselves overwhelmed and forced into cages and trees and ley lines, sapped of their power to aid witches and sorcerers and the creation of sacred groves. Of course, it’s incredibly difficult to kill a kitsune, so many suffered for eons until finally, their power was small enough to seek escape, and then, mad with illness and rage, they waged war upon all they came across.

Hannibal has no intention of being trapped or drained. There’s a ley line here, running through the cliff face, and Hannibal draws his own power from it to manifest his tails.

The ley line is resistant, but it yields eventually. The nogitsune who Hannibal once defeated bled almost all of the power of their seven tails into the ley lines of the world, so Hannibal is really only withdrawing what is his due, and even if the power remembers what Hannibal did to its original host, no kitsune will refuse aid against an age-old enemy like a dragon.

For a shadow kitsune, moving from here to there is simple; where is a shadow, there is a door. One only needs the knowledge of how to open that door and travel through it, and Hannibal has had many years to master this skill. That is why, when Francis comes to bear down on Will, who flashes fangs in warning, he is utterly surprised to see Hannibal appear in his path instead, eight tails wrapping through Francis's wings and legs to make him stumble and miss.

"Face me, Hannibal!" Francis snarls.

Hannibal cocks his head. "And why should I do that? You are barely one day old, Francis. I have lived longer than you ever will."

"I will tear you apart!" he vows.

"When you can hold shadow in your hand," Hannibal replies, "then you may brag of tearing a kitsune apart."

Which is when Will leaps back into the fray, and Francis wheels between the two of them dripping blood and roaring so loudly that the entire ground shakes. Yet for all his ferocity, his inexperience is clear; he is barely able to handle a young kitsune like Will, never mind two kitsune capable of working in sync with barely a thought or look. And oh, to slide his tails alongside Will's – that is the bliss that Hannibal has always sought, lightning and shadow fighting against fire.

That is not to say the battle is *easy*. Dragons have the natural advantage of extraordinarily thick hides, and they are nowhere near as fast as kitsune, but almost immensely stronger. Sometimes for all his speed, Hannibal cannot avoid being swiped from shadow like a fly.

Still, in the end, Will – clever kit that he is – targets Francis at his weakest spot, the legs where the armored scales are less in number to allow for greater mobility, and Francis's wings are too young and soft to give him true flight. It's all too easy to whip him into a survival frenzy, when he trades caution for rage, and when his wings flare up and to the side to cast shadows in a display of intimidation, Hannibal takes the opportunity to leap onto his back and set his sharp fangs at Francis's throat, right where the burning blood-red scale lies, and when Will takes the knife Francis carved of his creator's bone and slices through the dragonling's belly, Hannibal closes his teeth around Francis's dragon scale and rips it clear from his neck.

Francis screams, a true dragon scream that rattles the ground, and Will whines, recoiling. The scale was at the center of his transformation, after all, the root of his power, and by separating him from it, Hannibal has effectively severed his connection to dragonhood. If his creator had been alive, no amount of power would have dislodged that scale until Francis was fully transformed – but with his creator dead, his protections had died with it, and Hannibal swallows that scale and all of its power and grins a fox-smile.

As Francis staggers, he begins to burn anew. Dragon wings and claws and teeth are not compatible with human bone and flesh and skin, not without a scale to hold back the pain and the power.

If Hannibal were alone, he might have dined upon dragon wing and flesh for weeks, absorbing every last iota of power that he could, and then displaying the corpse as a warning to other dragons who might come calling for revenge or challenge.

Instead, he stands and watches as Will, trembling and blood-soaked and eyes kitsune gold, rises to greet him.

“It really does look black in the moonlight,” Will says quietly.

Hannibal feels the flush of pride, and he knows that his tails are currently dancing in excitement, as he is too tired to exert proper control. Only a kitsune could truly see the black blood of a dragon, after all. “See,” he replies. “This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us.”

Will looks down at his feet and arms, at the tail that curls and waves through the air, at shadows and sparks that gather at their feet, and when he looks up again, Hannibal sees more than the eyes of a kitsune – he sees the face of one, half human and half beyond the realm of human comprehension, with stars for eyes and fangs for teeth and curls of living shadow and a tail that emerges like a whisper on the wind from the blood of Francis’s corpse to loop around Will’s form.

“Will,” Hannibal says, because he has never known a kitsune to gain a tail before a soul, and yet, and *yet* perhaps he should have expected it from Will, his extraordinary kit.

This time, when they touch, sparks do arise as their tails meet and curl together, and the sensation is such that Hannibal hardly notices when they tip a hair too far over the cliff and the ocean swallows them whole.

Water, not even ocean water, can harm shadow. The deepest oceans are the ones where shadow reigns, after all, and so Hannibal emerges from the waves relatively unscathed, if a bit wet.

The same cannot be said for when water and lightning mix.

When Hannibal drags his kit into the shallows, Will’s eyes have gone dim and yellow instead of the bright kitsune-gold he is used to, and his tails shudder and drift apart, barely holding a single shape despite Hannibal’s presence and the lack of other humans to make Will hide. There are no more sparks, and Will’s heart is slow and faint, even to Hannibal’s enhanced senses.

Hannibal takes a deep breath. Even as his creator, he cannot call Will back. Water quenches lightning, and lightning is the core of what Will is. Will must come back of his own free will or not at all.

Still. It’s not like Hannibal is unable to give his kit a little nudge.

So Hannibal coils his eight tails around his kit and holds him tight in his arms, protection and admiration thrumming through his veins, and then he presses his mouth to Will’s and

breathes, breathes and breathes and *breathes* until the wild, twisting edges of his kitsune soul begin to fracture and pull, bit by bit, and then one by one they begin to detach completely and trace the path of his breath into Will's broken, bleeding, dying form.

If the burning is the mind of the kitsune and the blood is the body, then the breath is the soul, and this is how true kitsune are born. Not like the seers, gifted with their sight, or like the half-breeds, gifted with their tricks, but true kitsune, the ones who can live through thousands of years and laugh at the idea of time, who mold illusions as easy as breathing, who play tricks on friend and enemy alike, purely for the sheer joy of it.

Hannibal cannot wait for Will's first trick.

Kitsune are unpredictable, after all. Some have refused their creator altogether, turning the power back until it kills, whilst others have risen and drained their creator entirely, tail by tail, until they alone remain standing. Hannibal has *no idea* what his kit will – whether he will refuse Hannibal or drain him alive – and the unknown is the most exciting thing to a kitsune.

A single spark ignites.

In the next moment, Will's eyes snap open, so golden they hurt to look at it, and Will rears up with the ease of a two-tail, knocking Hannibal flat on his back in the waves and setting his sharp fangs to Hannibal's throat.

And still, Hannibal breathes.

"I could kill you," Will says, even as blood begins to run from where his fangs have punctured Hannibal's skin.

Hannibal just bears his neck. It would be true poetry for him to close his eyes, but he won't. If he is to die tonight, to slip from this existence into the void where the nogitsune first emerged from creation, then he will make his sight of Will his last meal and he intends to feast until his belly is full and aching.

"I could kill you," Will repeats, "and take the price of killing my creator and a fellow kitsune. I could kill you and make my own kit. I could kill you and take your tails as my price."

"You could," Hannibal says mildly.

It's not like he has grounds on which to object. He watched as his mother was consumed by darkness and then pounced with teeth and tail, and the century it took him to heal from the damage was a price he thought worth the gain. Besides, to know that he might die but that his power and his tails and his blood will live on in his kit? It is the greatest offer of immortality he could possibly consider.

"I could kill you," Will whispers, and then he closes his teeth and the pain is enough for Hannibal to stop breathing, momentarily, "but I won't."

And then they're too both too busy screaming to trade any more words in the human tongue.

Will, as it turns out, remains defiant to the last. Instead of inheriting the white-gold fur of his creator, his is red and orange and yellow, like fire and lightning and blood, and his tails are trails of sparks and stardust, enough that during his first week upon the boat, Hannibal spends more time than he thought he ever would with a bucket of seawater on hand to prevent a spontaneous fire.

Of course, Hannibal's fur is more silver and gold than white and gold these days, the price of the addition of his ninth and final tail, born of the power of Will's birth, but he spends a lot less time looking at his own fur nowadays.

He has more useful pursuits of his time, such as pinning a grumbling Will down and licking him from head to tails. It leaves a burnt taste in Hannibal's mouth, but it is worth it to taste sparks and stardust.

Will also spends a lot of time swimming. Hannibal isn't sure whether it's an adrenaline rush, for lightning to meet with water, or just to annoy Hannibal, but either way, Will always is much more relaxed and willing to submit to cuddling with Hannibal's tails afterwards, so he mostly ignores it.

Well, for at least two days. It's in his nature to ask.

"Do you enjoy nearly being extinguished?" he asks one day, when Will returns from the sea and perches on the side of the boat with a towel in one hand and a second in his tail, his other tail trailing alongside the side of the boat and courting sparks with the droplets of seawater the ocean flings up as the boat cuts through the waves.

Will shrugs. "I enjoy the exercise. I enjoy the peace."

"Hmm. Exercise would be better earned through shadow-traveling."

Will rubs vigorously at his hair and gives him an amused look from underneath the towel. "I am a lightning kitsune, as you pointed out," he says dryly. "Shadow travel will always be difficult for me. I'm far more apt at traveling by storm."

Hannibal almost forgets to reply. Nothing is more intoxicating than Will acknowledging his true nature.

"Time and practice will help."

"If you say that we have all the time in the world, I will throw sparks in your face."

For some reason, Will is incredibly amused at the way Hannibal's tails interact with his sparks. Hannibal is shadow and darkness, after all, and his tails do not like the bright light of Will's sparks, pure energy and lightning, but they like *Will*, and so they are constantly dancing to and fro, until to get too close yet unable to bear being too far. Hannibal no longer conceals them – it's annoying to do so with nine of them, now – and Will is always watching with a keen eye and his own tails twitching in interest.

Hannibal has not yet woken up to Will cuddling in his tails, but he eagerly awaits the day.

“You are welcome to try to storm-traveling.”

Will wrinkles his nose, which is a fair enough reaction; his last attempt left him stuck in the ceiling. “Maybe later. Where are we heading always? You never answered me.”

“There is a shrine in Japan, high in the mountains. It is where my creator took me for my burning, and where her creator took her, and where his creator took him. It will be a good place to rest and heal, especially since our kind are so spread out there. We are unlikely to be challenged.”

“When you say shrine,” Will begins suspiciously.

“An actual shrine,” Hannibal says, smiling slightly. “One built by human ancestors for a kitsune of old, a long, long time before I was ever born.”

“Don’t sound so accusatory. It would be like you to construct a shrine somewhere for yourself,” Will says matter-of-factly.

“I have already raised one. You have visited it. In Palermo.”

Will closes his eyes and groans. “Why am I not surprised?”

“One day you will raise your own shrine, and you will understand,” Hannibal tells him. “Although I suppose a sacred grove might suit your tastes better. Now then. How does your cheek feel?”

Will raises one hand to touch his cheek, and then quickly drops it. Even now, Hannibal knows it still stings. “Will this ever heal?”

Hannibal hesitates. For all the dragons he has faced, he does not know; it’s not like the dragons ever wondered how to heal wounds they inflicted on kitsune, and for all of his power and long life, Hannibal hasn’t actually met many other kitsune, much less killed them. “I do not know,” he says truthfully. “Dragons tend to attack with fire and wings and teeth; I have never been sliced so deeply by claws before.”

“Hmm. I hope it doesn’t,” Will muses. “The red looks rather nice next to my sparks.”

Scars inflicted like that, so deeply and so powerfully, leave a lasting mark. Hannibal has a splotch of grey on his white-gold fur that he will never shed, a mark of the sacred knife that killed Mischa. Will now has a streak of dragon-red on his fur, dark and shining amongst the sparks that make up his fur’s sunset palette.

“You regard it as a mark of power,” Hannibal says thoughtfully, “and not of vulnerability. Thus I imagine it will never fade from you, not completely.”

“That depends on whether other dragons will challenge us because of it.”

“Hmm. I imagine it is unlikely. The dragons are so few nowadays. They found it far harder to blend in, and harder still to reproduce. The angels and unicorns, at least, could take the skies,

and the kelpies and selkies to the sea, but the dragons had only the mountains and the valleys, and humans have conquered most of those."

Will gives him a look. "You mean to tell me," he begins dangerously, "that I have been swimming with selkies and kelpies and you did not see fit to warn me?"

Hannibal gives into temptation and lets a tail twine amongst Will's, and then he takes another step closer and twines another around Will's legs and waist. "My Will," Hannibal says fondly, "you are fire and lightning and you laugh as you swim through the storms of the deep. No creature of the sea will dare confront you without a clear advantage."

A purr thrums through Will's throat even as his tails welcome Hannibal's close. Will looks slightly embarrassed, but not all instincts are meant for the heat of battle, and Will has not yet mastered the skill of how to repress anything. Hannibal could teach him one day, perhaps, but for here, right now, in this small boat, hearing Will purring is as comforting as seeing Will perched on the couch in fox form.

"So tell me, my creator," Will says, curls blowing in the wind, "how does one defeat a kelpie or a selkie?"

That night, they sleep on the roof, their fox eyes reflecting the light of the stars above, and when they awaken, Hannibal finds his kit buried under the mass of Hannibal's nine tails, his own two tails of lightning curled so snugly with them that all Hannibal can see, even with his enhanced eyes, is flashes of lightning tucked within the shadows. Will's nose rests gently against Hannibal's paws, so Hannibal licks gently at Will's cheek, tasting ozone and fur, and lays back down with a sigh, breathing in the pure scent of Hannibal-and-Will, lightning and shadow, fox fur and sea salt. Every single time, the scent is just ever so slightly different, and Hannibal treasures each and every variation he has ever smelt. If kitsunes actually needed to breathe and eat and drink, he thinks he could survive forever off of the scent of Hannibal and Will.

In his sleep, Will grumbles, letting off a few more sparks, and Hannibal watches him and imagines his kit full-grown, with nine tails of stardust and sparks and fur so bright fire would pale in his presence. Then he curls more tightly around Will and dozes.

Japan, and the rest of the life they share together, can wait for another day.

FINIS

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaand we're done!!! Woot woot! Thank you to everyone who got involved with #FuelForRadiance and the Radiance Anthology itself, and now we get to wait in anticipation as things go to print!

The idea of shadow-traveling was borrowed from Rick Riordan's books (there's a child of Hades, Nico, who can do it in the books) and the "Fear me" lines exchange is borrowed from "The Doctor's Wife" episode of Doctor Who.

I'm toying with the idea of adding more to this verse, like little timestamps when Will gains more tails, but we'll see. I also have to work on my Murder Husbands Big Bang cuz that's due in like . . . a month. Thanks for sticking with me and all the comments and everything!!!

End Notes

Find me @ Telegram/Discord as TheSilverQueen : Tumblr as thesilverqueenlady : Twitter as silverqueenlady

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!